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The Present Position of Authenticity

Robert Donington

Not for the first time, the great divide is opening up between those of us, such as the readers of this Review, who aspire to authenticity in performing early music, and those others who argue, on the contrary, that authenticity is either unattainable or undesirable or both. It is also possible to take up a middle position, allowing for a measure of *compromise adjusted to the practical circumstances of a given situation*. But even so, it is the basic orientation of the performer which really counts. The effect of it is by no means merely theoretical. The differences in performing practice at the present time are startling, and their significance for every variety of our musical experience is growing all the time. It is not only for early music that the issue is getting to be so very topical. Haydn and Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert, on through Wagner and Brahms, towards Strauss and Elgar: but indeed why not any composer of any time? My own definition of authenticity is both simple and categorical. Authenticity is congruity between music and performance. "Do it now as it was originally done" is no bad start for getting round to that.

Dolmetsch took this stance from the 1880s, and from the 1920s I joined him as a youthful apprentice, taking him naively for granted and

regarding Landowska as a natural enemy for not wanting to play Bach as Bach might have wanted to be played, but on the contrary, as of course she was perfectly entitled to do, to play Bach as Landowska wanted Bach to be played. It is the same perennial argument today, and there really are two sides to it. Naively taking it for granted that there is only one side has now, however, invited a formidable counter-attack which those of us who by no means so naively nowadays favor authenticity must, I suggest, take seriously indeed.

In particular, two books have appeared (both of them London, 1988) which confront the two sides explicitly and deliberately. I do not say unfairly; and if the emphasis is a little more apt to be on attack than defense, that only goes to redress the balance in favour of more judicial conclusions as against the tacit assumptions of the naiver front.

The friendlier of these two books is Harry Haskell's *The Early Music Revival: A History*, which it very admirably is, giving due credit to Dolmetsch as the 'seminal figure' but also documenting very thoroughly the many and various enterprises which have owed little to Dolmetsch and less to his principles. Many reasonable objections to those principles are brought into consideration, but on the whole the author seems to conclude that authenticity, if only it could be rather more adequately defined and accurately circumscribed, has the most to offer towards the satisfactory performance of early music.

Nicholas Kenyon's lively symposium, *Authenticity and Early Music*, is deliberately a more provocative affair. Its most judicious contributor is Howard Mayer Brown; its most wayward is Richard Taruskin. It adds up to a diverse but by no means inconsistent case, challenging the very term as well as the whole concept of authenticity. It is eloquent concerning the use of period instruments and the attempt at period styles; remarkably uninterested in the contemporary treatises, which in effect are our best commentaries on period facts. For quite apart from the meaning of baroque music, there are the difficulties of baroque notation, so endlessly misleading to modern performers unacquainted with the clues to their accurate translation. The results of this ignorance amount to neither more nor less than wrong notes, such as could surely not seem acceptable even to the sternest critics of authenticity. Not one of us thinks that you can do it all out of the treatises. Some of us think that you can do it rather better with the assistance of the treatises. The only guarantee is good musicianship, but no one becomes any the more musical for remaining ignorant of the evidence.

On these grounds alone, this stimulating book falls some way short of victory. Nevertheless it raises points of reservation, some philosophical and some practical, which have always lain overtly or covertly in the background of any serious discussion. I want to give attention to certain of the most relevant of these reservations here.

The philosophical reservation has always centered around our uncertainty as to what a piece of music really is. Can we assert that the music consists in the composer's intentions, and that these have existed and continue to exist as an objective entity to which in practice we may relate more or less accurately, but which at least in principle can be regarded as a thing in itself, recoverable to the degree in which we can historically fathom it out? Or should we on the contrary regard music as a subjective entity, existing for us only insofar as we can recreate it in our own image as an individual experience in the here and now? For on the latter assumption, the search for historical fidelity becomes something of a nonsense, neither desirable nor even possible. And this assumption, although it is by no means a new thought, has received considerable reinforcement of late from the current trend among one school of historians who argue that we never can know history as a thing in itself, but only as a kind of reconstruction or fantasy profoundly modified by our own individual and contemporary predispositions — a valuable corrective to naive misinterpretation, no doubt; but it has been much exaggerated. If that were all, authenticity would be mere delusion, and the case for creatively adapting our modern performances of early music to our own innermost needs would be a strong one indeed.

It is not all. It is a half-truth of which the other half is equally true and equally important. For the composer's intentions, however intuitive and however elusive, at one time must certainly have existed: and something corresponding to them at least in some measure can hopefully be recovered provided that we have a sufficient degree of information as to what his notational symbols and his unnotated conventions were. And this within reason we may claim to do. The contemporary treatises are not all that confusing. It is perfectly possible to piece together a reasonably reliable and consistent view of large and important areas of factual information which we could never have guessed from musical intuition alone, provided that we are sufficiently alert to the many unavoidable divergences of taste and temperament, of time and place, of style and context, for all of which due and adequate allowance has to be made; and provided also that in our interpretations we bring to bear the same kind of musicianly flexibility, which is and always has been the mark of any genuine responsiveness and spontaneity in the performing

arts. A kind of educated flexibility is how I have always been inclined to define our proper attitude.

As for what is not conveyed by any notation nor confined to any convention, but comes straight from the mind and the heart of the performing musician, I have no doubt whatsoever that this is crucially conditioned by our own state, by our own environment, by our own expectations and our own mental and emotional glosses, whatever they may be. But what of it? That is the normal situation and the normal requirement for any experience of any of the arts, and is in no way peculiar to the experience of early music. What we get depends in part on what we find, and in part on what we bring to what we find.

And what manner of thing is it that we get when we experience music? I like especially Susanne Langer's idea that whatever obscure or not so obscure yearnings or intuitions the composer on however deep a level is or has been passing through are communicated after the manner of an analogue by the intimate ebb and flow, the ordering and the patterning of the music, which is with greater or lesser effort and imagination worked out. Obscure or not, we pick up his intimations in the measure of our own capacities. Subjectively if you like; but this does not mean that there is not also something objective coming towards us from out there. After all, music is acoustics and music is emotion. Both are real.

Living with philosophical reservations is no novelty in the history of thought. But practical reservations? I should be inclined perhaps to take these rather more seriously if I were not fairly sure that they can be countered in equally practical terms. The fact is that the attempt at authenticity has by now established itself so strongly in the current range of our musical activity that it may be challenged but it cannot be denied. The pleasure which it is giving to so many competent musicians and lay listeners must be the starting point in any argument.

Our practical reservations with regard to authenticity center upon our uncertainty as to how far we are really getting it right. The short answer is that we never can be certain, but that in practice we need not too much worry about this inevitable limitation to the scope of our knowledge. In practice, the important consideration is: does it work? It does work. There is about the best of our early music performances a glory and a convincingness which are their own best witnesses. It does not follow that they are authentic, but they certainly sound that way. We have certainly got our performances nearer to the most obvious requirements of early music, and we have certainly got them sounding better. That

seems to me a fair line of argument and a sufficient incentive for carrying on.

Sounding better? That brings me to the crucial question of historical instruments. The basic issue here is the relationship in music between sound and sense. This too, perhaps, may be a matter of degree. There can, up to a point, be music in which the pattern is so much more important that the coloring that any appropriate choice of instruments may serve acceptably. Bach was not above transcribing his own or other men's music with any necessary adaptations. Many solo or trio sonatas of the eighteenth century were published with a choice of instruments suggested on their title-pages: violin, flute, oboe, recorder, perhaps, although not all the pieces would have been regarded as lying satisfactorily for all these instruments alike. "Appropriate" is the operative word. But once an appropriate choice of instruments has been made, that choice has its own coloring, which then becomes important to our enjoyment of the piece. There can, I think, be no music of which the sonority is not quintessential to the experience. Always there is this strange duality between the sound perceived and the sense conceived. Or is it so very strange? Duality is endemic to our human condition. It is not a question of mind on the one hand and body on the other. It is a question of the *psyche-soma*, for which our acoustic and our emotional involvements are aspects of a single experience.

Hence the relevance of period instruments. There is no means to the sound of baroque music other than by using baroque instruments. There can be modern approximations of the utmost excellence, but they are not the same. We are, it is true, up against the usual difficulty that we shall never know quite how close we are getting, but what we are getting is so attractive that we can afford to tolerate some unavoidable residue of uncertainty as to the historical exactitude of what we are so obviously enjoying. Or, I should say, what many of us are enjoying; for there is not the slightest obligation upon anyone to opt for the baroque sonorities who prefers his early music in the after all very glorious sonorities of our modern resources. Pleasure, not duty, is the object of the enterprise. Those who regard historical fidelity as a moral obligation are, as I think, deceiving themselves. We can after all do neither benefit nor injury to all those long since past composers. Morality has nothing to do with the case. Artistry has everything.

Even if I thought that our pursuit of past artistry had no more to offer than the sixteenth century got out of its really quite unhistorical pursuit of classical Greek music, namely a stimulus to the totally different reality

of what was then modern music in the form of opera, I should not be unduly disturbed. That was in itself a superlative contemporary bonus as a result of deliberate antiquarianism however historically misconstrued. But as a matter of fact I cannot regard these two situations as more than superficially parallel. Whatever our reservations, we do know vastly more about baroque and earlier music than ever Mei or Galilei or Bardi or Conti could possibly have pieced together from the lamentable fragments and ultra-dense treatises of classical Greek music.

We have indeed a very great deal to go upon. Surviving instruments even though they may not always be particularly well preserved have plenty to teach us. Surviving treatises, even though often very far from lucid, have plenty to teach us. Exactness in detail is not always deducible from their many contradictions and obscurities, but just sometimes it is. There are two such details on which I am prepared to put my money without the need for any reservation. One is the upper-note start firmly on the beat to all normally cadential trills. The other is the absolute indispensability of the improvised *appoggiatura* quite certainly on the majority of instances and very possibly on every instance of normal cadences in recitative. And even here I am, of course, aware that not all my colleagues are in full agreement, although I think it is probable that the greater proportion of them are.

For the rest, I will not say that indeterminacy necessarily prevails. I will merely say that the situation may be almost indefinitely variable within a given style. But there nevertheless can be such a thing as a given style; and it is possible to keep informedly within that style or it is possible to wander ignorantly outside that style. We do not, as I think, have to seek out what precisely the composer's intentions were, partly because I am not convinced that his intentions were all that precise, and partly because the more precise his intentions were the more impossible it becomes for us to call them back. We may well wish on the other hand to seek out the kind of things which some decently average performer contemporary with the composer might be expected to have done. We may wish to keep within the broad boundaries of the style. There is such a principle as consistency in the arts, as knowing broadly speaking what goes with what. My own definition of authenticity depends on this, namely that authenticity is compatibility between a piece of music and the performance of that piece of music. Compatibility of sound and sense is for that reason alone an essential aspect of authenticity.

It is for the sake of compatibility between the sound and the sense of early music that I believe the early instruments to be not only enjoyable

but critical. Nicholas Kenyon has very reasonably asked (*Early Music*, Nov. 1988, editorial) how we can hope to provide exactly the historically appropriate instruments for each several decade within the baroque period, or again for Mozart or for Beethoven, or let me add for Schubert, for Brahms, for Wagner, for Strauss, for Debussy, for Elgar, and so on through the great but by no means historical glories of our modern symphonic orchestra. And the short answer may once again have to be that in all probability we cannot. No: but we can come a great deal nearer than doing the whole lot on our modern orchestra.

I do not know how historically precise the Beethoven orchestra was for Roger Norrington's Ninth the other night, nor how it related to Schubert's Ninth shortly afterwards; but I do know that in both cases the sonorities sounded not only appropriate but intoxicatingly beautiful. It was C.P.E. Bach, amusingly enough, who wrote that good enough is good enough. It is true he added that better is always better, and I am all in favor of that. But I come back to it again and again that the sheer musical delight of our search for authenticity in early and not-so-early music far outweighs any necessary reservations, whether philosophical or practical, and that our present stance, however capable of improvement, is good enough.

If I have nevertheless some remaining reservations of my own, they have chiefly to do with a certain lingering disposition to play down baroque music on the mistaken assumption that it was somehow characteristically more reticent than our own. That the sonority must be transparent and the articulation crisp goes without saying, but that does not imply insubstantial. It is interesting and disturbing that Will Crutchfield in his contribution to Nicholas Kenyon's symposium suggests that our motive in pursuing early music and early styles is fundamentally to escape the hateful fragmentariness of our contemporary music and (the basic cause of that) the divisiveness of our contemporary world. He is right in part, though not as I think wholly right. There is also the pure adventure of the game. Then there had better be plenty of adventure and not too much escape.

The flight from emotion itself is a perennial temptation, but it is not the real point of this great crusade of ours into the historical and the authentic. The real point is the reward of experiencing something other than ourselves; something different from our own familiar musicianly habits; something opening out upon strange and distant horizons. And so it is that we may seek out early music in early styles rather than merely adapting it more or less inadvertently to our customary styles.

But our customary joy in music's zest should not be left behind. Least of all should the joy of music be left behind. The joy is part of the authenticity. The romantic spirit is not confined to the romantic period, but only its stylistic incompatibilities, which cannot serve the baroque period. Our terms again are unsatisfactory. Bach's *Chromatic Fantasia* is hardly a classical piece, least of all in its impulsive harmonies. Beethoven, whose harmonies are actually not all that different, is surely a romantic, although not in Wagner's sense. Put it that the heart's imperatives are fundamentally the same, no matter in what style or at what period they find expression. We need for Bach a passion no less intense for being balanced by a full measure of that serenity in which as in so much else he sets the standard for his age.

Describe it as you will, it is a mortal error to under-play baroque music, and one which I think is now happily on the decline. There is, however, one mistake still prevalent which is I think allied to it, and that is a still prevalent though as it turns out wholly modern aberration by which vibrato is not only moderated, which is right, but excluded, which is not. There were in fact two varieties of baroque vibrato, one used as an ornament and very conspicuous indeed, the other used as normal instrumental and vocal colouring, and not conspicuous at all. For this some sufficient though not very extensive evidence has long been known and for as long ignored. But now a quantity of evidence so extensive and in sum so unmistakable has been brought together by Greta Moens-Haener (*Das Vibrato in der Musik des Barock*, Graz, 1988) that no conscientious and musicianly performer could rationally afford to overlook it.

We simply do know now that "with moderation" (Praetorius, 1619) the regular though by no means the indiscriminate employment of vibrato was not merely acceptable but habitual in the baroque period. That oddly spectral and impersonal quality of sound produced by total abstinence from vibrato has (except perhaps for certain rare and special effects) no warrant in the baroque sources or anywhere else. Did not Leopold Mozart like many before him consider vibrato to be "an adornment which arises from Nature herself"? It arises because any quite unvaried acoustic stimulus quickly fatigues the ear and reduces subjectively the sparkle of the sound. Variation of pitch or intensity or both at about six pulsations a second restores the sparkle and is indeed a natural instinct. Moderating the vibrato to suit the context is a part of good style: but eliminating vibrato looks to me suspiciously like a touch of that old insidious flight from emotion, though I am sure it is not intended in that spirit. It is not all that easy for a string player or a singer

to keep vibrato out of the normal colouring of his tone. The baroque evidence now shows conclusively that it is not desirable.

One other quite opposite idiosyncrasy which has acquired an undeserved reputation for authenticity is the greatly exaggerated use of the *messa di voce*, the swelling of a note from piano to forte and reducing it again to piano, all within the duration of that note itself. It is described by the baroque authorities as an expressive resource, but has been misunderstood by some modern performers as a compulsive mannerism. On short notes it merely sound disagreeably jerky. On long notes it can sound extremely beautiful; but when it is blown up into a series of unremitting dynamic lozenges throughout a slow movement, it sounds utterly bizarre, destroying as it does all sense of line and substituting a restless succession of unmotivated scoops. Any reading of the contemporary evidence which gives such unmusical results should have been suspect from the start. The fashion originated on the Continent, where it still largely persists, as it does also in some English and other groups under that potent and in so many ways beneficial influence. In such circles it is obviously felt to be the very banner of authenticity. But in other circles it is by now thoroughly discredited, greatly to my relief; for on this point my reservations amount to total disapproval.

But reservations or no reservations, uncertainties or no uncertainties, the broad standing of authenticity today does rate very high. And so for my part I think it should. All those uncannily beautiful period instruments; all that novel enticement of sounds and of idioms, so attractively other than our own; quite simply all that pleasure given to so many ordinary lovers of music — there is no gainsaying it. We may not find it easy to agree on just what we mean by authenticity, but that it means something, and that what it means is of proven value, I cannot doubt. And neither, perhaps, would most readers of this journal. Something which we loosely call authenticity is here to stay.